

20. ON THE FEEDING HABITS OF THE KING COBRA *OPHIOPHAGUS HANNAH* (CANTOR) AT NANDANKANAN BIOLOGICAL PARK, ORISSA

These observations on the feeding habits of two King Cobras *Ophiophagus hannah* (Cantor) were made at the Nandankanan Biological Park, Orissa.

On 20-xi-1973, a dead rat snake [*Ptyas mucosus* (Linn.)] measuring about 157 cm (61 inches) was given to one of the King Cobras measuring about 390 cm (13 feet) at about 9.30 a.m. At 12 noon it bit at the middle portion of the rat snake's body and then slowly shifted its grip towards the head without leaving it completely. It reached the head after 15 minutes and then started swallowing the rat snake, taking another 30 minutes to swallow it entirely, uncoiling itself during the process.

On 19-xii-1973, the same King Cobra was given a live rat snake measuring about 150 cm (c. 6 feet) in the forenoon. The rat snake moved about inside the cage and the King Cobra did not show any interest in it. The vertebral column of the rat snake was struck and the snake immobilised and it was offered to the King Cobra in the afternoon. Then it caught hold of the middle of the body and swallowed it as described above, taking about the same time.

As the other King Cobra measuring 268 cm (8'-9") had refused to eat a live *Xenochrophis piscator* (Schneider) measuring 81 cm (c. 2½') repeatedly offered to it the previous week, the Keelback was immobilised in the same manner and offered on 27-i-1974. The cobra twice examined the prey with its tongue during ten minutes of our observation but refused to take it and moved away. The Keelback was then

killed and offered, and within a few minutes the cobra caught hold of the anterior part of the body and swallowed it in 15 minutes.

Before taking the prey the King Cobra usually examines it with the tongue and its willingness to eat it is indicated by "yawning" once or twice. During the process of swallowing, the upper jaw remains more or less stationery and the lower jaw by sideways movements takes the prey and slowly pushes it inside the gullet. After completely swallowing the prey, it also "yawns" twice or thrice. During this process of swallowing the peristaltic movements of the abdomen were also visible. Attempts were made earlier to offer live pigeons, bandicoots and guinea-pigs but none were taken.

According to Gowda (1963) who observed it in Mysore Zoo, the King Cobra when hungry approaches its prey, bites it and injects venom only sufficient to reduce it to a state of unconsciousness, and not to kill it; then it begins to swallow the snake entirely from the head region. He further stated that the whole process from the time of attack to the time it completely swallowed its prey took about half an hour, and that it did not feed on dead snakes.

At the Rotterdam Zoo, frozen snakes have been successfully fed to the King Cobra after thawing, though it was necessary to move the body inside the enclosure to induce it to bite it, prior to eating (Polder 1969).

The main diet of the King Cobra in a state of nature is snakes, presumably taken alive, and it is possible that this habit and method of taking dead and disabled snakes has developed in captivity.

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